

As Republicans take U.S. House, Florida's clout surges

By Alex Leary, Times Staff Writer - December 10, 2010

Leadership posts will give the state its most influence in decades.

WASHINGTON - U.S. Rep. John Mica started to pull out his cell phone but was suddenly struck with modesty, pushing it back in his pocket. A second later, he could not contain himself.

The phone log showed a flurry of conversations with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

So goes life at the top.

When the 112th Congress convenes in January, Mica will be chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, one of the most powerful perches on Capitol Hill.

Two other Florida lawmakers will take the helm of committees: Rep. Jeff Miller over Veterans' Affairs and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen over Foreign Affairs.

Add to the mix the likely return of Pinellas County Rep. C.W. Bill Young as chairman of the defense appropriations subcommittee and Florida has significant clout in Washington - power that has been surprisingly elusive despite being the fourth-largest state and a critical battleground in presidential elections.

"This is big. Florida is certainly going to be recognized as one of the powers," said former Rep. Clay Shaw, a Republican from South Florida who saw his 26-year career end with the Democratic wave of 2006.

Now Republicans are retaking control of the House, sweeping out dozens of incumbent Democrats nationwide. Bad news for the four Democratic losers from Florida - Republicans will outnumber Democrats 19-6 in the state delegation - but reason to celebrate for Mica, Miller, Ros-Lehtinen, and perhaps all of Florida.

No other state will have more committee leaders. And not since the early '80s has Florida had three chairmen at the same time, when Democrats Dante Fascell, Don Fuqua and Claude Pepper oversaw foreign affairs, science and technology, and rules.

Florida today is much bigger and has more pressing needs.

Though federal dollars are scarce and incoming House Speaker John Boehner is demanding efficiencies, having Floridians in powerful spots could help. Mica, of Winter Park, is especially

well-positioned and has already played a role in securing funding for a high-speed rail line from Orlando to Tampa.

"I have new standing, but I'm not going to misuse that," he said. "I have to look at the whole country. I've got projects in New York, Chicago, California."

Florida has long felt slighted with transportation funding, in part because of formulas that favored states with road and bridge networks that were established before the Sunshine State boomed.

"We haven't gotten our fair share. I don't think having Mr. Mica in this position will hurt at all," said Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders' Association.

Miller, who represents the Panhandle, will have considerable influence over veterans issues, and Florida has the nation's second-largest population of veterans, with 1.7 million. (Only California has more.)

"We'll do everything we can to make sure the limited resources that may be available are spent appropriately," Miller said.

His chief concern will be to provide "vigorous" oversight of the second-largest federal agency and he thinks savings can be achieved in reforming contract procurement procedures.

Ros-Lehtinen's position will give her broad oversight over U.S. foreign policy, and she plans to challenge President Barack Obama's more open stance toward Cuba, where she was born, and press for tougher sanctions on Iran and North Korea. She has already signaled her desire to cut foreign aid.

"I plan on using U.S. contributions to international organizations as leverage to press for real reform of those organizations, such as the United Nations, and will not hesitate to call for withdrawal of U.S. funds to failed entities like the discredited Human Rights Council if improvements are not made," the Miami lawmaker said in a statement when her post was announced.

Florida has long been an underwhelming presence in Washington. In 2008, the Capitol Hill publication *Roll Call* ranked Florida 42nd among states in congressional influence.

There has been a lot of turnover, leaving less-tenured members. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, who was elected in 2002, just gave up a seat on the powerful Ways and Means Committee for a long-shot (and failed) bid for U.S. Senate. Republican Vern Buchanan of Sarasota learned this week that he'll join the committee.

Democrats are not completely hapless. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston is considered a rising figure in the party (though the November losses slow her momentum) and Rep. Kathy Castor of Tampa played a role in crafting the health care legislation from her spot on the Energy and Commerce Committee. Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson is still a relatively new member to that

chamber, though he has been effective in getting military funding and addressing other Florida-specific concerns.

But the Republican resurgence is well-timed for Florida given the strong GOP complexion of the congressional delegation. The national prominence of incoming Sen. Marco Rubio only adds to the clout.

"I almost feel guilty that we've been blessed so much," with committee chairs, said Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta. "But that's a testament to those guys who have had the longevity to stay here and be leaders."

Times researcher Natalie Watson contributed to this report.